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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY HEARINGS ON TURKISH-ARMENIAN
RELATIONS: A VENTING SESSION OF WIDE-RANGING VIEWS

YEREVAN 0000008 001.2 OF 004

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On December 19-20, the Foreign Relations Committee of Armenia's parliament held public hearings on Turkish-Armenian Relations titled "Issues and Perspectives." Viewed as a positive step to discuss the delicate issue of improving Turkish-Armenian ties, the hearings quickly morphed into a public vent session where a diverse range of officials, opinion makers, and analysts voiced sometimes forceful views on the topic. While disagreements remained on many subjects, including the genocide question, territorial issues, and Armenia's treaty obligations, there was unanimity on one issue: Armenia continues to perceive Turkey as a threat. End summary.

ATTENDANCE AND ATMOSPHERICS

¶2. (SBU) The Speaker of Parliament and Armenia's Foreign Minister opened the hearings, which were attended by journalists, academicians, think tank analysts, NGO representatives, parliamentary staff, marginal politicians, and a handful of representatives from the opposition Heritage party and pro-government Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaks). Some figures from the Armenian Diaspora also attended. After the hearings' much-heralded opening session, no Armenian officials attended the hearings, apart from a few parliamentarians. Surprisingly, not even the MFA's Turkey desk attended (as a speaker duly noted). Although 20 Turkish representatives were invited, none of them showed up.

¶3. (SBU) With the exception of one especially charged session where ultra-nationalistic views were expressed, the hearings proceeded calmly. Devoid of interactive floor discussions, the hearings took the form of a series of monologues, where 40 speakers spent between five and 30 minutes, one after another, sharing their views. Only FM Vartan Oskanian's speech was followed by a question/answer session, and spontaneous discussions mainly took place in the corridors. Hearings materials included, among other things, a chronology of Armenian-Turkish ties beginning with Turkey's recognition of Armenian independence in December 1991, and a list of

countries that have recognized as well as condemned the alleged Armenian genocide.

HEARINGS SEEK UNDERSTANDING OF VIEWPOINTS

¶ 14. (SBU) MP Samvel Nikoyan, secretary of the ruling Republican Party faction, told poloffs that the purpose of the hearings was for Armenia's parliament to better understand the viewpoints of different segments of Armenian society, coordinate common approaches, and present these approaches internationally. He regretted the absence of Turkish representatives, especially parliamentarians, since he thought they were freer than GOT officials to express Turkey's own set of diverse views on Turkish-Armenian relations.

NO PRECONDITIONS TO RELATIONS

¶ 15. (SBU) In their opening remarks, which were aimed at creating a dialogue on ways forward in Turkish-Armenian relations, FM Oskanian and Speaker Tigran Torosyan nonetheless criticized Turkey for imposing preconditions for normal ties. Torosyan said the two countries should instead work together on joint principles of cooperation and leave other issues for future consideration. Oskanian reiterated the GOAM's official position that Turkey and Armenia must establish diplomatic relations and work toward an opening of their border before other issues can be addressed. Oskanian emphasized that this was not a precondition, but rather the "zero" starting point for any two nations' relations. Oskanian regretted that two neighboring countries which share a common past were wasting valuable time that could instead be used to create a new history of relations.

YEREVAN 00000008 002.2 OF 004

¶ 16. (SBU) FM Oskanian and other speakers spoke in detail about each of the three preconditions they see having been set by Turkey before normalizing relations: solving the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) issue in favor of Azerbaijan; recognition of Turkish borders through a one-sided ratification of the Kars Treaty; and an end to efforts to gain recognition of the genocide. On NK, most agreed that it contravened international legal norms to mix third country interests into the relations of two independent states. Regarding the Kars treaty, FM Oskanian said that since Armenia had inherited the ratified treaty from Soviet Armenia and had taken no action to annul it, the treaty remained valid. On genocide recognition, he said that whatever the Armenian Diaspora chose to do abroad, it was Armenia's official position not to get involved in such efforts (a broad assertion not borne out by statements made by several other speakers).

¶ 17. (SBU) According to Haik Demoyan, director of the Genocide Museum, and many other speakers, Turkish preconditions for normalizing relations constituted ultimatums in Armenian eyes. Coupled with the closed border, one could view the situation as being akin to military confrontation. Demoyan declared that Turkish authorities could not yet accept the genocide, out of fear that it would overturn the country's perpetuated legend of a strong and just state, and fear that doing so could create a national crisis. Demoyan said he saw this in the faces and tears of the few Turks who visit the museum.

BORDER ISSUE

¶ 18. (SBU) Virtually all presenters agreed that the opening of borders with Turkey was important for Armenia. Gayane

Novikova from the "Spektrum" Research Center nevertheless cautioned that the opening of the border would do more short-term harm than good to the Armenian economy, since Turkish goods would flood local markets and overrun local production. She also worried about the cultural expansion of Turkey. Manvel Badeyan, a prominent businessman and Republican Party MP, echoed the concern, asserting that Armenia had little to gain since it had nothing to export to Turkey. He also said it was a myth to expect transportation costs for exports and imports across an open border to fall significantly. Other speakers criticized the government for its lack of serious study concerning the impact of an open border on the Armenian economy.

EU REP SAYS COMPROMISES ARE KEY

¶9. (SBU) Peter Semneby, the EU's Special Envoy for the South Caucasus, was the only representative from an international organization who spoke at the hearings. Stressing the importance of normalizing relations, he said the EU was the best example of compromises between countries, and encouraged Turkey and Armenia to move in that direction. They should work to overcome the past, without forgetting it, and take gradual steps to achieve progress in their relations. He encouraged bilateral and multilateral meetings between Yerevan and Ankara, suggested creating an open forum for permanent contacts under the auspices of a European body, and offered EU assistance in all areas.

REACH OUT TO TURKISH SOCIETY

¶10. (SBU) According to Vahan Hovhannisyan (Dashnak party leader, Deputy Speaker of the parliament, and a current presidential candidate), Armenia should start communicating with Turkish society, which he said was hungry for truth about its past. He contended that Armenia could never get along with a despotic neighbor that deprived its citizens of access to its history. As long as the organizers of the genocide were revered as heroes, Turkey's 70 million population would never be ready to accept the genocide and other historical facts, he said. The idea of reaching out to

YEREVAN 00000008 003.2 OF 004

Turkish society was echoed by others. Artak Shakaryan from the National Academy of Sciences' Institute on Eastern Studies passionately harangued the GOAM for its passivity toward Turkey. He argued that new global communications could be harnessed to soften Turks' negative perceptions of Armenians, and urged the use of the internet, blogging, Turkish language websites, public diplomacy, and working with Turkish students in the West.

GREEN LIGHT FOR NGOS

¶11. (SBU) FM Oskanian, Speaker Torosyan, and other speakers expressed the necessity of a Turkish-Armenian dialogue on all levels. According to Karen Bekaryan, an expert from the Foreign Relations Committee who also leads the prominent NGO "European Integration," the hearings gave civil society representatives the green light to start working with their counterparts in Turkey without fear that their work would be viewed as contravening GOAM policy. Tevan Poghosyan, the head of two separate think tanks in Yerevan, reflected on the warm relations between Armenians and Turks he has witnessed at international events, and offered the assistance of NGOs as interlocutors in advancing people-to-people contacts.

TURKEY'S EU MEMBERSHIP: YES BUT NOT YET

¶12. (SBU) Virtually every speaker who touched on the issue of Turkey's EU membership agreed that an EU neighbor would be beneficial to Armenia. However, there was unanimous concern that Turkey should enter the EU only after it recognized the genocide and affirmed its European values, including guarantees for the rights of its religious and national minorities. Several speakers, including FM Oskanian, argued that Turkey would never repent for its past atrocities of Armenians if it were admitted to the EU without first embracing EU values.

FORCED COOPERATION

¶13. (SBU) Artur Aghabekyan, a Dashnak party member and the former deputy Defense Minister, talked about ongoing cooperation between Turkey and Armenia within the NATO and OSCE frameworks. Both Armenia and Turkey, for example, have obligations under the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. Aghabekyan stated that while Turkey takes full advantage of the provisions within this treaty to regularly inspect Armenian armed forces, Armenia has inspected Turkey only once. On Armenia's positive experience within the NATO Partnership for Peace program, Aghabekyan regretted that the closed border with Turkey limited greater opportunities for Armenia to increase its NATO ties.

TURKEY BASHING AND HIDDEN AGENDAS

¶14. (SBU) According to Ruben Safrastyan, head of the Institute on Eastern Studies at the National Academy of Sciences, Turkey's stance towards Armenia belies a hidden agenda. He alleged Turkey is using the blockade to weaken Armenia, promote out-migration, and create such national discontent that political forces would come to power in Yerevan who would be willing to accept Turkish preconditions. He also posited that Turkish National Security institutions controlled debate on the genocide issue in Turkey, and therefore the issue lays outside the purview of politicians or civil society.

TREATY OF SEVRES - STILL DREAMING

¶15. (SBU) Ara Papyan, Armenia's former Ambassador to Canada, analyzed all of the treaties that regulate Turkish-Armenian relations (Sevres, Kars, Moscow, Lausanne, and Alexandropoulos), and found that only the treaties of Sevres

YEREVAN 00000008 004.2 OF 004

and Lausanne remain legally valid. According to Sevres, Armenia's legal borders should encompass the current Turkish territories delineated in President Woodrow Wilson's arbitration decision. (Note: storm of applause followed his presentation. End note.) During a different session, Papyan noted that according to archival documents, the damage Turkey caused to Armenians during the period 1914-1919 is estimated at about USD 41.5 billion.

MORE RADICAL VIEWS

¶16. (SBU) Another presenter whose speech was greeted with cheers was the ultra-nationalist Armen Aivazyan of the Ararat Center for Strategic Research. By far the most radical speaker at the hearings, Aivazyan even used the occasion to blame the Dashnak organizers of the hearings for their "pro-Turkish" sentiments. He also blamed the authorities for having forgotten the "Armenian Issue" (the issue of returning Armenian historical lands), and accused Armenia's

post-independence presidential administrations of conducting flawed foreign policy. He called on the authorities to develop repatriation programs, and to recall from Turkey all Armenian citizens, whom he claimed were living as "hostages" there.

CULTURAL DESTRUCTION

¶17. (SBU) Samvel Karapetyan of the Research of Armenian Architecture NGO that specializes in documenting Armenian historical monuments, gave a photo presentation on the Armenian patrimony in Eastern Turkey allegedly destroyed by the Turkish authorities. He asserted that while Turkish authorities destroyed the majority of historical monuments between the 1940s and 1960s, destruction of monuments continues even today. Karapetyan argued that such reconstruction projects as Akhtamar Church were mere window-dressing aimed to placate Europe.

EXECUTIVE BRANCH EXHAUSTED ITS ARSENAL

¶18. (SBU) In concluding remarks, Armen Roustamyan, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, noted that the authorities in Turkey and Armenia are deadlocked on normalizing ties, and it was up to parliamentary diplomacy to get the process moving again. He promised that the hearings' materials would be published in book form by March, and that a special subcommittee would be formed to continue work on these issues. Together with the Foreign Ministry, his committee planned to develop a concept paper on Armenian-Turkish relations which would envisage future actions by parliament, the government, and Armenian society. The sub-commission will include MPs and independent experts.

COMMENT

¶19. (SBU) Despite the awkward format, some nationalistic chest-thumping, and dreamy rhetoric, the hearings represented a moderate step forward in Armenian society's discussion of relations with Turkey. The fact that the parliament took the unusual step to hold these hearings, and open them to society at large, is significant. Although many speakers expressed views we would regard as out of touch with current political reality, this kind of debate needs to happen here if Armenians are going to deal more realistically with their regional circumstances. In that respect, any discussion is better than none at all.

PENNINGTON